

Original citation:

Dytham, Siobhan and Rowell, Carli Ria. (2015) Inequality in education – innovation in methods : reflections and considerations. Exchanges: the Warwick Research Journal, 2 (2). pp. 277-283.

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Inequality in Education – Innovation in Methods: Reflections and Considerations

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Abstract *Against a backdrop of metamorphosis in the UK educational landscape and the increased focus on ‘innovation’ in research funding and postgraduate programmes, a conference entitled ‘Inequality in Education – Innovation in Methods’ (IEIM) was held at the University of Warwick in November 2014 to offer space to reflect on ‘inequality in education’ as a field of research and the impact, and future prospect for ‘innovation in method’ in this field. This article offers reflections and considerations based on the IEIM conference and the articles contained in the resulting special section published in this journal. The article argues that innovation in methods offers new and exciting directions in terms of increased understanding of inequality in education. The article also discusses the possibilities that innovative methods offer in terms of including a wider range of participants in research and increasing opportunities for participants to be involved with the research process and communicate effectively. The article ends with some ethical considerations in relation to new and innovative research methods before drawing to a conclusion.*

Peer review: This article has been subject to a double blind peer review process



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Keywords: Inequality, Education, Innovation, Research Methods, Ethics, Visual Methods

Introduction

Against a backdrop of increasing focus on ‘innovation’ in research funding and postgraduate programmes, a conference entitled ‘Inequality in Education – Innovation in Methods’ (IEIM) was held at the University of Warwick in November 2014 to offer space to reflect on ‘inequality in education’ as a field of research and the impact, and future prospect for ‘innovation in method’ in this field. This article offers reflections and considerations based on the IEIM conference and the articles contained in the resulting featured section published in this journal.

This article highlights that central to the theme of ‘innovation in methods’ is that of students and participants, as opposed to career motivated reasons such as increased funding or publication opportunities. The dissatisfaction in ‘traditional methods’ is also discussed and considered as well as the opportunities that innovative methods may create to tackle this dissatisfaction such as including more diverse participants in research. This leads to a discussion of ethics both in terms of the ethics of innovative research methods, but also the potential ethical problems of not adapting and creating new research methods and therefore excluding those who, for whatever reason, are not able to participate in research through the ‘traditional methods’. Finally a consideration of the interpretation and analysis of the data produced through innovative methods is discussed.

Reflections and Considerations

Within this article we have sought to reflect more broadly on the conference and discuss some of the core themes and issues that were raised as well as considering how these can relate to the concept(s) of ‘innovation’ in research and how these ‘innovations’ relate to the field of ‘inequality in education’.

Firstly, a particularly strong theme that ran throughout the conference and the articles in this collection was that of students and participants. It is encouraging to think of innovation in this way and of innovation being focused on participants, whether through reaching new groups, working in better ways with new or existing groups or helping to facilitate student voice, rather than innovation being driven by more ‘researcher motivated’ reasons such as increased funding possibilities or simply ‘advancing the field of knowledge’ without considering participants or what benefit this new knowledge might have for them. As previously mentioned, the focus on ‘innovation’ in terms of publishing or research grant opportunities means that the focus on students as discussed here can’t be taken as a given. However, at this conference at least, it still seems to be one of the main drivers for researchers and an important aspect of ‘innovation’, particularly in the field of inequality in education.

Secondly, we note that in many of the conference papers and the discussions that followed there seemed to be dissatisfaction or a recognising of the limitations of ‘the interview’ as a research method. The interview and related methods are often seen as the dominant method through which to collect data in qualitative research. An important aspect of some of the innovations discussed at this conference was making alterations to this dominant method or simply using

alternative methods to overcome what was seen as some of the restrictions or limitations of interviewing. In this special section, **Ingram (2015)** highlights how working with plasticine and then discussing their creations helped the young men in her research access and discuss emotions as it was easier to talk about the model than 'me'. This enabled her to engage with the students and consider emotions that may not have been accessible or easy for them to discuss in a traditional interview context. As a further example, **Shepherd (2015)** discusses using a variety of methods such as walking interviews and participant created photographs to work with students with autism. Again, the traditional interview was not entirely appropriate for this context. During the conference a whole variety of reasons for wanting to use additional or alternative methods to the interview were discussed, whether this was to enable the inclusion of different types of participants in the research, or wanting to access emotions or issues which may not be accessible through an interview, or wanting to engage hard to reach groups, or wanting to enable students to communicate and express their views without being restricted to an interview format, or to research different modalities and gain a deeper more nuanced understanding of a certain topic. As such, an array of additional and alternative methods were discussed, for example video, art based research, plasticine modelling, participant generated photographs and student drawings.

Related to this issue about adding, adapting and replacing the interview method with 'innovative' methods, an important comment was made about the relative reach and representation claims of social research. Although interviews often tend to be the dominant methodology, this conference really highlighted many of the groups and issues that these methods may not be particularly effective to research and gain an understanding of. As such, potentially many people are being missed out or miss-represented by our methods and methodological choices. The title of the conference, 'Inequality in Education – Innovation in Methods', is important here. Should the research focus and type of participants we work with be limited or decided by our choice of research methods? Or should the research methods be chosen, altered and adapted to suite the research focus or type of participants we are working with? It seems the latter is more desirable, otherwise when researching inequality in education we run the risk of recreating inequality by only working with participants, or asking research questions, which can easily be addressed with our current methods and methodologies, meaning that we exclude anyone who, for whatever reason, cannot fully participate in these methods. In each of the articles included in this section the authors give examples of how methods have been used to work with, engage, give voice, include, and help different groups of students to communicate and

participate in research. 'Innovation in Methods' was therefore felt to address 'Inequality in Education' not just as a research topic, but through the creation of more adaptive, inclusive methods which allow wider groups of participants to be involved and enables them to communicate with us effectively, thus tackling inequality in education research as well as the research topic of 'inequality in education'.

A third theme emerging from the conference was that of ethics. The issue of ethics is central to social research and so too it comes as no surprise that the notion of ethics in innovative research arose as a theme central to the conference. Throughout the conference, speakers highlighted the ways in which video, model making, and drawing enabled them to elicit deeply held information otherwise unattainable through somewhat more traditional and static methods in their attempt to embrace and understand the participant's social world. Model making and drawing were of significant interest given their propensity to enable participant's to create and then reflect, thus enabling them to gain an insight into the ways in which individuals present themselves, understand their own biography and connect to the wider social world. Much discussion was devoted to exploring the ethical issues associated with methods that serve to reach a deeper emotional level with the question: "Are there ethical issues when using methods which reach these deeper, emotional levels?" stimulating much debate. If these new methods can offer new depth and access otherwise inaccessible emotions, information and feelings, does this pose an ethical problem? It is acknowledged here, and was advised at the conference, that this is not something a researcher should enter into lightly and is something they should consider when planning 'innovative' methods. Does extra support need to be offered to participants? If participants find this process upsetting or distressing what will be done? And, in more extreme cases or particularly sensitive topics, is it ethical to conduct this research in this way if participants may access deep feelings or emotions which they may not have encountered if they had not participated in the research? Whilst, as discussed earlier, innovative methods can have many positive aspects in that they can be liberating and foster greater participant inclusion and research-participant collaboration, the 'new' is always, at least partly, unknown and whilst this should not prevent innovation, researchers should consider the implications.

At the conference delegates acknowledged and raised the concern that as researchers the tool we give the participant ultimately influences what they come up with. It is in this vein that it was argued that the findings are a product of the methods as much as the individual and that ethically we need to consider the implications of such factors through every stage of social research. It is important to reflect critically on the methods we

have used and the implications this may have for the findings of our study and the way in which the participants in our research are represented.

A final point in relation to ethics is that of anonymisation. At the conference it was noted that using video and photographs can create many difficulties in terms of anonymisation and participant confidentiality. Again, it was felt that this should not prevent researchers from using visual methods, however, extra care should be taken when explaining the use of these methods to participants and gaining consent to use the data generated.

To conclude on the topic of ethics in innovative research, what became apparent was the fact that at every stage of innovative research, from conception to execution and dissemination, there is the constant need to think through the ethical issues involved in a way that places the participant at the heart of the research. As **Nind et al (2013: 664)** write, 'both ethics and innovation are about reflexivity as well as technique', therefore although there seems to be a tension between innovation and ethics, the two are not incompatible and in fact the reflexive process central to both good innovation and ethical practice can be mutually beneficial.

At the conference significant discussion was accorded to the use of visual research such as drawings, videos and, to a lesser extent, model making. Specifically questions were raised regarding the interpretation and analysis of such data with much attention accorded to the notion of second-order representation and interpretation. To illustrate such, **Syyeda (2015)** drew upon participant illustrations in order to access and understand learner's attitudes towards Mathematics. During the conference Farhat Syyeda talked the audience through the use of images drawn by participants in order to access attitudes and in doing so the question: "How do we know our interpretations are valid? Particularly when using visual methods" was raised by conference attendees. Delegates communicated and shared with the audience what they understood by the drawings that participants had created. In doing so what was acknowledged was the idiosyncratic ways in which one interprets and responds to an image. What one image may mean to one person may mean something completely different to another, visual references and metaphors were acknowledged as being to an extent subjective. As **Classen** argues, despite the extent to which we might think it to be, seeing is not natural and just as all other sensory experiences, the interpretation of what one sees is historically and culturally specific (**Classen 1993**). The representations that one derives from vision, paintings, film, drawing and photographs beyond that forms on ones

retina, the image that is interpreted by the brain is a product of intentionality. This was a theme widely acknowledged by delegates and central to the day.

Conclusion

Although over the past few decades vast progress has been made in tackling inequality in education, inequalities still persist. Research focusing on inequality in education is essential in gaining a better understanding of inequality and to allow further progress to be made. Although, It should also be remembered that inequality does not just exist in institutions of education but also within educational inequality research itself, through the frameworks and methodological choices made to research that inequality and the potential exclusionary consequences of these choices. Through a combination of existing methods as well as new methods and innovations, this field of research can help researchers to question, challenge and address these inequalities and allow greater and wider participant involvement in research as well as more in-depth and considered understandings of the inequality in educational institutions and policies. Innovation in methods therefore offers positive and exciting prospects for future research. It is, however, also important to note that care should be taken to ensure that innovations are evaluated and critiqued and that any additional ethical considerations arising from such innovations are considered.

Innovation in education research is an exciting topic which is ongoing and whilst there are issues to be further discussed and debated, this conference highlighted the huge possibilities for innovation in education research in the future and the new and interesting possibilities this opens up. Innovation isn't done just because it's new or different or just for the sake of it. The best innovation is targeted and chosen for a specific purpose, as demonstrated by the presentations and following discussions at this conference.

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To cite this article:

Dytham, S. and Rowell, C. R. (2015). Inequality in Education – Innovation in Methods: Reflections and Considerations. *Exchanges: The Warwick Research Journal*, 2(2), 277-283. Retrieved from:
<http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/article/view/64>